

**“AUREL VLAICU” UNIVERSITY OF ARAD**  
**FACULTY OF HUMANISTIC AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
**DOCTORAL STUDIES: PHILOLOGY**

**DOCTORAL THESIS**  
**IMAGES OF TRADITIONAL FEMININITY IN**  
**TRANSYLVANIAN FICTION**  
**(IOAN SLAVICI, LIVIU REBREANU,**  
**ION AGÂRBICEANU)**

**ABSTRACT**

SCIENTIFIC COORDINATOR:

Prof Ionel Funeriu, PhD

PhD Candidate

Daniela Lucia Drăgan

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## ABSTRACT

*The eternal story, the woman*, has represented along the ages, directly or indirectly, a span subject, but also a favorite study matter for artists, writers, historians and sociologists. Proposing not only to follow a certain feminine typology at a certain writer, but also an approach to this through an enlightening association/ dissociation from thematic perspective, the present work obtains consistency and originality, becoming, as we consider, a useful research both for pupils and students interested in this theme and for acknowledged literature lovers, specialized or not, yet preoccupied in discovering the *eternal feminine*, as it is reflected in the Transylvanian fiction.

The art of creating the character has always occupied a central place in the area of criticism, both in the literary, and in the cultural one, as a direct consequence of the fast ascent of cultural studies and of the postmodern re-exploitation, as it is also reflected in Sanda Radian's emphasis: "Literature has always consciously or not approached the crystallization in characters of the eternal woman. The ineffability of femininity, as function of a narrative structure, is pointed out mainly in the modern novel, where, many times, it is the trigger of the action".<sup>1</sup> In essence, this doctoral thesis does not propose only a synthesis of the studied bibliographical material, even if it is supported by the scanning of a large number of specialty works. It attempts to perform, an authentic radiography of the feminine character from the perspective of the Transylvanian village, disclosing typologies and revealing unprecedented aspects where they appear. Some of them even have a symbolic quality.

*Largo sensu*, from a deep sense of local patriotism and because it derives from the heart of Transylvania, the present work represents the result of an endeavor directed towards the identification of the defining features of the feminine characters of Ioan Slavici, Liviu Rebreanu and Ion Agârbiceanu, with the remark that each of these writers approach the feminine problem through a specific vision, loaded with unsuspected depths.

We also consider that it is indispensably needed the specification that this doctoral thesis extends, completes and touches the already existing researches connected to feminine typology in the Romanian literature and the universal one, but it opens a specific way towards

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<sup>1</sup> Sanda Radian, *Portrete feminine în romanul românesc interbelic*, Editura Minerva, București, 1986, p. 6.

the Transylvanian national peculiarity, in order to preserve a worthy literary- cultural identity. If the feminine portraits of the Romanian inter-war fiction were given, as it can be noticed, an increasing attention, (see Sanda Radian: *Portrete feminine in romanul românesc interbelic* – 1986, Corina Ciocârlie: *Femei in fata oglinzii* –1998, Ioana Pârvulescu: *Alfabetul doamnelor* – 1999, Sultana Craia, *Îngeri, demoni si muieri* –1999, Elena Zaharia Filipaș, *Studii de literatură feminină* – 2004), the same cannot be said about what the feminine representation in the fiction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century means, except, some of the latest (Steliana Brădescu: *SLAVICI sau iubirea ca mod de viață* – 2011).

Structured in four chapters and final considerations, this doctoral thesis analyses the feminine characters in the works of Slavici, Rebreanu and Agârbiceanu. These characters come almost totally from the rural environment and are marked by a visible archetypal weight, focused mainly on age categories such as: adolescence, the girl to be married, the daughter, sister, wife, mother, old widow, young widow, grandmother, mother-in-law, old woman etc. If around the young women there were always built dreaming, waiting and fighting universes, because they always owned the power of beauty, vital energy, the power of creation and procreation, the old ones found their vocation in work and dedication, in keeping a family united, and in the gift of cumulating and sharing wisdom. It is known the fact that in the Transylvanian family each member has its own, well defined place that things are not done in hurry but after a careful consideration thinking that before taking decisions the head of the family takes counsel with the nearest ones. However in the middle of all things (how else?) stands THE WOMAN and, from the most intense and sensitive point of the couple, she is the one that confers cohesion to the whole, or on the contrary, divides it, when, beyond the great war, she herself fights with the temptations of life or with her own flaws, lacks or addictions.

**The 1<sup>st</sup> Chapter** of the present work focuses on some defining aspects regarding the national Transylvanian peculiarity, identifying the most powerful literary realist lode from the Transylvanian countryside in the works of Ioan Slavici, Liviu Rebreanu and Ion Agârbiceanu. This lode is capable of reproducing the cultural patrimony of the countryside world and of allowing the gradual approach to the authentic feminine universe, without attenuations or romancing that were particular to those times. Briefly, we have also referred to the historical context of the beginning of the Transylvanian literature at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, starting with the Turkish- Austro war in the 1683- 1697 and ending

with the process of hungarization of the Romanians from Transylvania during the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

**The 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter** offers an overview on the literary work of the prose writer from Șiria Ioan Slavici and talks about the feminine archetypes retrieved in his works of reference such as *Pădureanca*, *Moara cu noroc* or *Mara*, but also in less known works or the ones that were never studied. We tried to draw out some feminine essences of best quality, but also the impact the peasant woman (daughter or wife, mother or widow), had on the family or the community she lived in.

**The 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapter** is dedicated to the prose writer Liviu Rebreanu and the feminine depiction in his works, the emphasize sliding on the seriousness of the representation of love in writings such as *Ciuleandra*, *Pădurea spânzurașilor* and *Ion*. Detected, usually, in adolescence or their early days, when they cannot even earn their living because of their social conditions, but mostly the legislative ones, the women appear at Rebreanu in lifelike depictions of sweethearts, fiancées or new wives, when their overflowing femininity is dedicated to the couple/ marriage, namely to the acknowledgment of love, to its proximity, experimentation and capitalization on an existential level.

**The 4<sup>th</sup> Chapter**, the most consistent regarding the information and the most extended one in the economy of this thesis, proposes the rediscovery and rereading of the work of Agârbiceanu. We want to assure the readers that that this represents maybe one of the most embedded dowry chests of the Transylvanian space, definitely, a collection-worthy work, whose well deserved place is next to the works of his predecessors Slavici and Rebreanu and not in their shadow. Entitled “The Eves of a patriarch”, this chapter proposes a general radiography of the countryside world through the filter of some forgotten works such as *Strigoiiul*, *Vremuri și oameni*. *Lume nouă*, *Biruința*, *Jandarmul*, *Stana* and many others, writings that are capable of evoking universes and invoking memorable feminine figures, like only the literate priest Ion Agârbiceanu from Cenade can do it. We confess that a profoundly affective spring towards the originality and complexity of the works of Agârbiceanu stimulated us to insist on this chapter with the ardent feeling that we find ourselves in front of an author who needs to be given back to the modernity and not hidden from it.

**The 5<sup>th</sup> Chapter** synthesizes the observations resulted from the previous chapters and exposes the conclusions that we reached regarding the perception of feminine and of femininity on the literary and geographical grounds detained by Slavici, Rebreanu and

Agârbiceanu. It also constitutes a genuine incursion in a Transylvanian world incredibly systematized and attractive, with peasant women dressed simply or festive, in clothes spun with red and black thread, sometimes with silver or gold through the shades of yellow and blue, peasant women seen in their villages, either caught in the dance with the bachelors, or on the field at harvest, or at church, at feasts, with necklaces around their necks and basil grains in their hands. Not the poverty and wealth make the true difference between these women, but the intelligence, beauty, industry, the power which helps them overcome the inherent obstacles, problems, sufferings and losses. The wisdom they acquire over the years and the simplicity or difficulty which they live their lives with, alongside (and for) the loved ones, all these are the ones that truly matter and that confer the peasant women a beauty that does not fade over the years, but becomes more striking, because “The relations of the woman with her family had a special meaning, because she lived permanently in the centre of a family, whether we talk about the paternal one, or the one created through marriage. In this setting, there are presented different depictions from the life of a woman, she being gradually daughter, sister, wife, mother, daughter-in-law, and mother-in-law. Each of these roles implied a multitude of attributes and responsibilities”<sup>2</sup> and all of them had to be fulfilled with a devotion that could only honour them.

In substance, through a toilsome intercession, but extraordinarily captivating, we have succeeded to debrief reference works for the Transylvanian fiction, because Slavici, Rebreanu and Agârbiceanu represent the basics of this literary temple of Transylvanian origin. Although, in terms of Charles Mauron, “The essential knowledge of the work of art is missed by scientific investigation. It is a revelation which prolongs in personal relationships.”<sup>3</sup> Our constant concern stays the one for the enrichment of the modern reader’s communion with the work of these writers in the area of feminine personality, which ingrains it with precious features, impossible to ignore in the intercession of understanding it. Motivated by multiple interior resorts, the present doctoral thesis, will offer the reading of a pleasant return to the past, somewhere around the First World War, both with the intention of discovering events from the past, and mostly of presenting the way the woman in Transylvania was perceived approximately a century ago. As Șarolta Solcan was emphasizing in her book which studies the status of women in the three former Romanian provinces, there

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<sup>2</sup>Șarolta Solcan, *Femeile din Moldova, Transilvania și Țara Românească în Evul Mediu*, Editura Universității din București, 2005, p.14.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Mauron, *De la metaforele obsedante la mitul personal*, Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 2001, p. 12.

is an undisputable reality which can be found, in the works of the three Transylvanian fiction writers: the one that the woman lives, generally, in a profound relationship of interdependency and continuous interaction (first of all) with members of the family, then members of the community. The social being of the woman is configured in and from her family. She is capable of putting herself, in a way or another, in the service of the community, as she is taught and as her material status allows her.

From the variety of relevant aspects of the present doctoral thesis I will only make some general observations. In the fifth part of this study I have synthesized largely the observations from the former chapters, trying to include feminine characters in typologies based on age or marital status. The Transylvanian literature whose piles of resistance are Ioan Slavici, Ion Agârbiceanu and Liviu Rebreanu clothed in a certain historical context, fact which imprinted a visible national nature.

The Transylvanian realism has enriched the Romanian literature with an impressive gallery of feminine portraits built, undoubtedly, on models extracted and pointed out from the real life. Even if the man is the one who monopolizes the action of the literary texts, as the owner of a superior social and familial status, as many times as it appears, the feminine character colors the discourse, making the atmosphere more human inciting to reflection or wistfulness, making the reader more sensitive. The originality of the three Transylvanian writers and also the common element of their work is the orientation towards the world of the village, towards the Romanian plowmen from Transylvania, towards local values. The thing that sheers both in the works of Slavici, Agârbiceanu and Rebreanu, is that central- European thinking model, because their heroes and heroines are settled, wise people, who live day by day in an archaic world, tidy and attractive, ruled by traditional values and well defined moral perceptions which are also obeyed most of the times.

The present study was based on only one façade of the Romanian feminine as it is received by Transylvanian realism in the work of Slavici, Agârbiceanu and Rebreanu. It is thought today that Moldavian women are beautiful, brave, bold and communicative, about Oltenian is said that they are fast, smart, ambitious and enterprising, about Muntenian women that they are logical, organized, family and tradition lovers and about women from Banat that they are smart, proud and ambitious, sometimes stubborn but loving and good housekeepers. Literature, as well as the other arts operate with essences, sublimates and opens perspectives over the elusive: it is what the Transylvanian fiction also offers us, which projects the woman

in traditional depictions of child, mother, daughter, young girl (or, rarely, old maiden), wife, grandmother and widow. Rich in cultural and spiritual resources, the epic of the Transylvanian rural area allows a complex inventory in multiple directions (traditions, habits, feasts and superstitions, passing rites, funeral cults etc.).

The peasant woman from Transylvania is a hard working woman. Usually her day starts early in the morning even if she is the lady of the house, or the daughter of her parents. If she does not purr, she weaves, if she does not weave, she hatches, if she does not hatch, she cooks or cleans or does laundry or hundreds of other activities around the house, things that only she can do best. She pays attention to details. She is idealistic, never leaves her job undone, a well done work is another desideratum of Transylvanian people, even if it sometimes lasts more: quality is preferred over superficiality in everything.

Undoubtedly the image of the woman in the Transylvanian literature is first of all due to the position that the woman herself has taken in the life at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. After a long period of passive femininity from the Văcărești brothers age continued with the able exaltation of the romantic trend, we can find in the Transylvanian realism the image of a woman full of telluric positive energy, attached to eternal values like family, love, integrity, honor, dignity, faith, nationality etc. The way in which the woman perceives herself calls the tune, definitely, the way in which she is perceived by men and generally by the others.

When the attention of the narrative instance is fixed upon her, the Transylvanian woman is an extremely visible woman, who changes, moves, deepens or colors situations. Young or old woman, she emanates calm and peace through the way she thinks, feels, behaves. She is certainly not rushed on the contrary she is finical, calculated, balanced and efficient. She loves and takes care of her house, irrespective of how much or how less she has. Endowed with a natural beauty, exceptional for many times, she has a developed esthetical sense, which is why her clothing and the one of her family represents a mirror of her good taste, of her social status, of her industry and cleverness.

Regarding the way of approaching the characters we have noticed essential differences between the three Transylvanian writers, fact that provides the originality and uniqueness.

Ioan Slavici creates complex portraits that have to be received in the intimacy of the environment in which they evolve. He is often a sententious, supportive of the thesis according to which every individual is responsible for his deeds, the woman or the man being the results of their choices.

In his turn, the realist Liviu Rebreanu writes on the line assigned by his ancestors, but tags the beginning of another perspective over the countryside world. His attitude is a relatively distant one, impersonal; he is a cold and objective observer of the rural area and the events within it.

Ion Agârbiceanu continues the tradition that Slavici begun, but stays tight to an archaic world, engrained by religious spirit, ruled by traditional values. His theological background, the fact that he lived in the middle of the Transylvanian village fundamentally influences the way in which he builds his characters. He grows in love with them, feels empathy for them, sometimes even giving the feeling that he protects them. In the case of Agârbiceanu, the feminine character pallet is the richest one, starting with the little girl that has not got yet to the age of going to school (Veverița) and ending with the old woman (baba Mâia) who is useless and waiting for her death. All these would constitute the Transylvanian brand of his literature.

Complex and profound, without being sophisticated, the Transylvanian peasant woman is a woman endowed with many qualities and few flaws. Her weak point stays the fervour/ addiction, the unleashed love which is shown towards a man, towards money or even towards drink. In essence Slavici`s, Rebreanu`s and Agârbiceanu`s fiction talks about an actually strong woman, surely worthy of all patience, attention and appreciation of the current reader.